

Tribute to Gill Bracey and Tony Gelsthorpe

As they stepped down from their roles as founders and organisers of the Friends of Leicestershire Chorale, Vivian Anthony, President of Leicestershire Chorale, paid them this special tribute.

I first became aware of Gill and Tony when they arrived in a minibus with a large group of friends for our Black Tie Fundraiser event at Osbaston Hall in 1998. They had organised that lively group from North Leicestershire to support Chorale. Tony had, like so many others, myself included, been inveigled into joining the Chorale family by our founder Andrew Fairbairn. Andrew had appointed Tony to a senior post in Leicestershire Education when he was the Director and when Andrew retired, he and Tony and two other friends of Chorale, Joan Gregory and June Herbert, met regularly for lunch and when Gill retired she joined them. Before he had an unfortunate accident and died in 2007 Andrew used his charm to persuade Gill and Tony to set up the Friends of Chorale. They had been attending Chorale concerts for several years, even before Tom became our Director in January 2005.

As loyal and committed supporters Gill and Tony will have attended over a hundred concerts and even appeared on our tours to St David's and away events in London, Derby and elsewhere, despite Tony's serious illness. They are highly knowledgeable and enthusiastic in their critical support and with so many other choirs in the region, it is a tribute that they chose to lend us their considerable talents. As keen aficionados of Benjamin Britten's music, particularly since Gill became a second-homer in Aldeburgh, they generously helped with the financing of our last Britten programme.

Andrew chose wisely; I can think of few people better qualified to run a Friends' organisation. When it comes welcoming the faithful to our concerts, charming them and putting them in the right mood with a glass of wine and just the right level of enthusiasm. When you add to that their superb organisational abilities, memory of names. Knowledge of the good and the great (and a willingness to treat all as such), attention to the detail of what makes for a good concert environment and a considerable level of generosity to all associated with our choir family. It is not surprising that they were afforded the honour of becoming the only non-singing members of Chorale. Having tried many ways of building up our audience through-out our history, including a discounted price season ticket, our finances remained critical and Friends' support essential. Andrew had been successful in finding money to support the big YFAV events and had introduced the fund raising dinner in 1991. He had good connections with local philanthropists, who would sponsor concerts but funding problems remained. When Andrew died the responsibility came my way so you can imagine how pleased I was when Gill and Tony joined the fundraising. After the Black Tie event in Allexton, they became principal organisers and this continued until Chris took over for Whissendine. Over their years in charge, the dinners have raised over £30,000, without including special donations.

Gill and Tony rightly consider the establishing and growth of the Friends as their greatest achievement. Friends provide the core of the guests for the fundraiser and among them are individuals who are most generous in the donations they make, usually in support of our Choral Scholars; the first of whom were selected when I succeeded Andrew in 2007. Gill and Tony have been influential in persuading others to follow this example and support our many activities with young people, including those at De Montfort Hall, where they usually set up their 'Friends' Corner'. With over 60 members the Friends not only make up a good part of the audience for concerts but also contribute significantly to our income. So Gill and Tony have played a vital part in helping our finances to a sound footing. We shall miss having them in a prominent position welcoming the audience but we are assured they will continue to support our concert whenever they can and they have helped to induct Peter and Mary Fairley into the role for the coming season; they inherit a thriving organisation. We wish Gill and Tony many happy years of music listening.